

How to Identify a Hero

Read the following heroic characteristics as suggested by Peter R. Stillman in *Introduction to Myth*. Keep this handout for future use.

Heroes are often of obscure or mysterious origin.

They may be sons of gods or of royal parents. Their childhoods may be unusual; they may be left to die but then they may be rescued and brought up in poverty or isolation. Often they do not discover their real parentage until they are older and can prove themselves through some sign.

Heroes are neither fools nor invincible.

Heroes, while they may be partly divine, are definitely human in their natures. They are subject to fear and danger; they are not immortal but may suffer harm. Sometimes heroes are invulnerable except for one spot on each of their bodies. Also, sometimes heroes may be defeated only with one particular weapon.

Heroes are called upon to make a journey or to follow a goal or quest.

Heroes frequently choose difficult or dangerous adventures. Sometimes they do not choose, but are chosen for the adventures. They labor for the good of others by ridding a land of a hideous monster, or they seek to bring back to their people some object which has been lost or stolen. Their quest may not always be for something noble, but they follow through nobly and refuse to surrender.

The heroes' ways are not always direct or clear to the heroes.

The way or path of life is never clear, thus heroes frequently become lost or must take detours or solve riddles.

The heroes' ways are beset with dangers, loneliness, and temptation.

Cruel kings, horrible monsters, dangerous seas—all these are physical dangers faced by heroes. Far more dangerous may be the feeling of isolation or alienation as heroes go far from home alone. Heroes are often tempted to give up or give in. Temptations appeal to their senses rather than to their intellect when they are encouraged to rest, to eat a certain food, or to drink a certain wine. Women often appear as the most dangerous temptation of all.

Many quest tales supply friends, servants, or disciples as company for heroes.

When heroes are given companionship, they are often still alone because the friends or servants do not understand the quest or are not motivated by the sense of mission but by friendship.

Name _____

Date _____

Heroes have guides.

Frequently heroes receive help from unexpected sources be they fairy godmothers or beautiful/ugly witches or sorceresses. The heroes may be given a magic potion or weapon or simply information. Sometimes guides are limited by powers stronger than their own and therefore they can only help up to a certain point.

Heroes descend into darkness and are not the same after emerging from the darkness.

Usually the final test of heroes is their descent, either physical or emotional, into some Hell-like place of suffering or death. The fear, loneliness, or despair experienced by heroes is a type of death-rebirth which leads to enlightenment or maturity, changing heroes in some important ways.

What heroes seek is usually no more than a symbol of what they really find.

While the goal is usually something tangible, the success or achievement of that goal is somewhat more spiritual. The maturity or growth of heroes becomes more important than the actual object of the quests.

With few exceptions, mythological heroes are male.

While women may be equally courageous and noble, they are not often seen in the role of hero. Women provide protection, guidance, and knowledge for the hero; they give him the secrets of life.